



**Education Committee
Public Hearing
March 4, 2022**

**TESTIMONY OF SECRETARY OF THE STATE DENISE W.
MERRILL REGARDING:**

H.B. No. 5285 AN ACT CONCERNING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM (SECTION 5)

Good afternoon Chairmen Sanchez and McCrory, Vice Chairs Barry and Daugherty Abrams, Ranking members McCarty and Berthel, and members of the committee. My name is Denise Merrill and I am the Secretary of the State of Connecticut.

I am here today in support of Section 5 of H.B. 5285 AAC The Public School Curriculum. Although there are many provisions in this bill, I'm testifying solely on the issue of civics education. Section 5 would establish a Connecticut Civics Education Task Force to review the teaching of civics education in Connecticut's schools and propose improvements. Section 5 would establish the Connecticut Civics Education Task Force to evaluate and make recommendations on how public schools provide instruction on civics, citizenship and American government to students by:

- (1) Reviewing existing curricula and the high school graduation requirements;
- (2) Receiving recommendations from educators, administrators and the public;
- (3) Reviewing best practices; and
- (3) Exploring the feasibility of establishing public and private partnerships to fund and support enhancements to such instruction.

I have been a very strong proponent of civics education for many years, and this legislation is critical to making sure our Connecticut students are best prepared, supported, and educated moving forward in their own communities and within our society.

On the final day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when our Constitution was adopted, Americans gathered on the steps of Independence Hall to await the news of the government our founders

had created. They asked Benjamin Franklin: "What do we have, a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin replied: "A republic, if you can keep it."

Essentially, it is all our responsibility to be stewards of democracy. How can we expect people to do that if they don't know what government does and how it works? I would like to reference [CivXNow](#), a bipartisan coalition of over one hundred actors including academic and research institutions, learning providers, and philanthropic organizations, which asserts that civic education must include a focus on: (1) Civic knowledge and skills: where youth gain an understanding of the processes of government, prevalent political ideologies, civic and constitutional rights, as well as such history and heritage; (2) Civic values and dispositions: where youth gain an appreciation for civil discourse, free speech, and engaging with those whose perspectives differ from their own; and (3) Civic behaviors: where students develop the civic agency and confidence to vote, volunteer, attend public meetings, and engage with their communities.

There is also emerging evidence suggesting a correlation between high quality civic learning programs and increased civic engagement from students. According to the 2011 [Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools](#) report, students who receive high quality civic education are more likely to "understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic activities." There is also evidence to suggest that poor, minority, rural, and urban students who receive high-quality civics education perform better than their counterparts.

If we do nothing to improve our civic education programs, it puts our democracy at risk. I'd like to begin with some surprising statistical evidence revealing the extent of American citizens who are unable to name the three branches of government. [According to a survey from the Annenberg Public Policy Center](#): 51% of people were able to name all three branches of government; 17% were able to name only two branches; 8% were only able to name one branch; and 23% of people could not name ANY branches of government.

In addition, the [Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#) found [in a recent survey](#) that only 4 in 10 respondents can pass a multiple-choice sample of the U.S. Citizenship exam-- an exam that immigrants must pass as a requirement to become naturalized citizens in this country. Of the 41,000 Americans surveyed, only 15 percent of American adults could correctly note the year the U.S. Constitution was written, and only 25 percent knew how many amendments there are to the U.S. Constitution. I have also been heartbroken by some of the recent data regarding the public's mistrust of our elections.

When people don't know how our democratic institutions work, it becomes easy for misinformation and conspiracy theories to take hold, which can hijack the confidence of our elections process and system of government altogether.

In 2016, the State Department of Education and I launched the Red, White & Blue Schools initiative, which aims to promote the importance of civic involvement among Connecticut students of all ages. Connecticut schools that participate are encouraged to develop civics programs and classes that are innovative and informative. I've also been involved in the Connecticut's Kid Governor® program for many years, which illustrates how elections work and how Connecticut residents of all ages can choose to participate in our democratic society.

To me, it's simple: Our children are our future, and they need to be set up for success in the most comprehensive ways possible. The very nature of developing and sustaining a social norm means that a shared or common experience across all schools is needed. While civic learning has been essential throughout American history, in this age of growing polarization, it should be considered an essential component of a 21st-century education.

In close, to quote Sir Francis Bacon, "Knowledge is power." In a democracy, the values that are at the core of civic learning are different. They are foundational to helping young people develop the dispositions needed to actively engage in civic life and maintain the norms by which Americans debate and decide their differences. That's why I support the language in Section 5 to ensure that our civics programs can and will be evaluated and improved where necessary. I take this position alongside the Connecticut Bar Association, which has taken an association position in support of the language in Section 5, so we can empower our Connecticut students with the proper tools to set them up for success.

I support Section 5 of this bill.